

# "NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY:" LABOR, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND THE BIRMINGHAM LEGACY OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRIES DEBATE

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I am a US citizen. I live in a sick, nay dying society. I'm not sure if the society itself knows it is dying, or if it has simply resigned itself to its passing, watching as the zombie economy of the past thirty years greedily slurps the last of its vitality. Arguing capitalism, and its so-called creative destruction, is a force of nature, its elites sit back and recite Robert Frost: "Nothing gold can stay" - except, of course, for the piles of gold they've extracted from that society in the process of destroying it. That gold must stay - right in the coffers of their foreign bank accounts where it belongs. This is no paradox when the goal of the last thirty years or so has been the restoration of their power, their control over the levers of economic discipline such that they could force the rest of us to do their bidding with the apolitical hand of the market. [1] Those who look at the crisis and claim capitalism is broken or unbalanced foolishly assume that this isn't exactly what capitalism was designed to do. They're wrong; it isn't; this is capitalism unleashed, as Andrew Glyn put it before his untimely passing. [2]

But you know that. Or you should. All Cultural Studies scholars should know this and most are probably tired of hearing it. Likewise, you know that, parallel with this development, a dynamic wave of social, political, and material technology has unleashed the immaterial, creative, cultural economy of the commons - exciting developments that seem to confirm all we originally thought about how culture, ideology, and audiences work. Meanwhile, the industries where this work is rewarded with things like wages and benefits have become all the more adept at skimming what rewards exist for itself and its high level executives. They may lose skirmishes over IPR or market share to forms of piracy, but ultimately the people who do the creative labor in western culture, the crowdsourced, social marketed, micro-economic labor, are no more able to pay for their rent, their food, and their debt. [3] Not that this keeps industry insiders from advocating restrictive possibly apocalyptic policies like the SOPA bill or ACTA.

Yet, still, in parks around the country, there are glimmers of hope. The incredible spread of Occupy Wall Street has surprised all of us. This renewed energy, reminiscent of 1968 - or even 1849 - has shifted the national conversation leftward, with issues of class, education, labor, inequality, and the sustainability of capitalism suddenly on the lips of TV news commentators. While the organizing principles (and principals) have been decidedly anarchistic, the issues that seem to be at the heart of the movement intersect distinctively with the intellectual lineage of Cultural Studies. Below, I'll catalog some of this lineage, drawing upon the early theoretical and strategic frameworks of the New Left laid out by Stuart Hall as the founding editor of the *New Left Review* - theoretical positions which, as Dennis Dworkin convincingly demonstrates, can be seen as the genetic materials of the Birmingham School to come. [4]

On the other hand, these recent events create some welcome tension around some of the anarchist and autonomist tendencies that have so completely infused most Cultural Studies oriented discussions of economics, labor, and the culture industry. As Stefano Harney insightfully points out in his intervention on the "Creative Industries Debate," there is a typological similarity between the conceptions of Italian Autonomist Marxists like Lazzarato and those of Stuart Hall and the early Birmingham School.

Again it was cultural studies that first helped us to focus on this idea of an unfinished commodity and its labour process because it was cultural studies that first introduced the idea of a commodity that could be coded and recoded by those who take it up, and it is cultural studies that located this process of unfinishedness of the commodity (and the subject) in society at large, in the social factory and not in the workplace. It is also cultural studies that first gives us a sense of the magnitude of this social factory, and consequently of the magnitude of the work going on in this social factory. This post-workerist idea of the social factory - of the realms of social reproduction coming under the searchlight of paid work without penetrating all the shadows of unpaid work that remains in those realms - is thus first posited by Italian Marxism, but first felt, explored, lived by British cultural studies. [5]

Harney is interested in answering a specific question, posed by Toby Miller in response to Daniel Mato. Mato claims that, because of the broad work of signification done by commodities of all kinds, thinking of all industries as cultural makes a great deal of sense. Harney, paraphrasing Miller's response, finds it roughly corresponds to the emergence of new forms of labor and especially management that can be explained by Italian autonomist notion of the social factory. He provides a helpful overview of the way that contemporary management literature itself is taking up the notion of creativity as a product in and of itself: "Now it is not just that creativity is required to manage the worker, or even that creativity is required to innovate the product, but that creativity is the end, not just the means, of the labor process." [6]

In short, Harney's answer to the question of "why now" is that the capitalist organization of the labor process has only recently caught up to the understanding of the production of cultural value that the Birmingham School outlined in relation to the culture industries debates several decades ago. I fully concur with this assessment and think it an important contribution to our understanding of both of culture industries themselves, and of the lineage of Cultural Studies as an academic enterprise. But I want to press on a different portion of this narrative and ask, "why then?"

When the CCCS was founded, the culture industry looked incredibly different so it is strange that we should find theories about those industries suddenly more applicable to today's configuration of forces. Moreover, the very limited focus of the culture industries as engines of ideology was famously critiqued by Dallas Smythe as a central blindspot in Western Marxism, going back to Adorno. [7] Yet it made sense at the time if we understand the project of Birmingham, the project of the New Left, and the way both conceptualized the relationship between the welfare state, the economic mode of production, the ideology producing culture industries, and the social relations on the ground. Both projects had the objective of finding a new lever of social and cultural change in the absence of either the material degradation of unhinged capitalism (i.e. class-led revolution) or the potential utopian or populist vitality of avant-garde culture. In other words, Cultural Studies' discourse of the culture industry emerges from a certain material and social context, where the state, economy, and culture existed in an unprecedented arrangement. What is, perhaps, most interesting in the present day relevance of this culture industry discourse is the way that all of these relations have changed.

Over the course of the last 150 years or so, we can see three distinct phases of the culture industry. More specifically, there have been (at least) three eras marked by different configurations of the relationship between culture, politics, the dominant mode of production and the commodification of culture. In terms of the culture industry per se, Lawrence Lessig proffers a useful distinction in his book *Remix*. He describes a pendulum between what he calls "read only" and "read/write" culture, using the now almost ancient distinction between recordable consumer DVD and CDs. [8] In the pre-recorded culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, culture itself was predominantly R/W in the sense that much of the

culture out there was available for creative re-use by everyday citizens. All music was potentially folk music; all literature potentially open to local (and even reactionary) interpretation. [9] This open, dynamic form of cultural production was undermined, in Lessig's interpretation, by the advent of recorded culture. In this second stage, culture became read only because the technology of production and distribution were monopolized by large, corporate entities.

Cultural Studies emerged from the second era, whose contours I'll explore below; and we are now in a liminal phase brought on by the uncertain conflagration between the neoliberal beast, the convergence culture that has ever so briefly slipped from its slimy paws, and the nascent popular uprisings under the banner (and hash-tag) #occupyeverywhere. This third phase, or conjuncture, once again reconfigures these relations, making it important to revise the theoretical assumptions and political strategies that were adhered to in an earlier era of "the culture industry." In some ways, the culture industry has replaced all other industries; but this shouldn't give us the illusion that the traditional politics of the left can be abandoned and the struggle given over to the precarious multitude of immaterial labor. In order to outline what I mean by this, it is important to discuss the characteristics of each of these conjunctures. After returning to this, I will outline the direction I think this points to both in our understanding of the culture industries and in terms of political and theoretical strategy going forward.

In the first phase, as mentioned above, culture itself was relatively small and local; unrecorded folk and avant-garde elite; a source of resistance and pleasure in a society where needs and desires were increasingly fulfilled by commodities. Michael Denning argues that this material circumstance explains the modern meaning of the word "culture:"

Culture, one might say, emerges only under capitalism. Though there appears [in the works of 19th century writers] to be a culture in precapitalist societies, the concept is invented by Tylorians and Arnoldians alike to name those places where the commodity does not yet rule: the arts, leisure, and unproductive luxury consumption of revenues by the accumulators; and the ways of life of so-called primitive peoples. The world dominated by capital - the working day, the labor process, the factory and office, machines and technology and science itself - is thus outside of culture. [10]

The seemingly local or suddenly, mercurial, transnational culture complemented an equally precarious employment situation (due to the scientific labor management of the second industrial revolution in the US). But it was also one in which organized labor quickly tested its legs and fought tooth and nail for its rights. In the US, this was true even for decades after the Supreme Court had made government workplace regulation practically unconstitutional (*Lochner vs. New York*, 1905) and it continued well into the most severe economic contraction (till now) in that country's history. As Mike Davis observes, the most numerous labor protests in the history of the US occurred at the height of the Great Depression, in 1936-7 - arguably leading to FDR threat to pack the Supreme Court with another 6 justices in order to get a ruling favorable to his economic plans. [11]

This potential opposition of culture to capitalism - the fact of a potential space where the relation of capital and commodity did not reign, reified, complete - gave hope to the Marxian inspired critics of the early Western Marxist tradition (and led them to despair when it appeared culture itself would suffer the same fate as everything else in industrial capitalism.) [12] This lament of the colonization of culture by industry should be contextualized in relation to the orthodox Marxist lament of the dissipation of popular struggle by the integration of labor and management via what fellow critical theorist Fredrick Pollock referred to as "State Capitalism." [13]

It is therefore hard to parse the next stage, to separate the material and economic changes from the cultural, social and political; but the role of the cultural industries were indeed pivotal, in much the way that the Frankfurt School believed, though with important differences. Whatever ideological effect mass culture had on society, it was always secondary to the ideological effect of the apparent tilt (for white folks, anyway) towards a more equitable society. In parallel with the culture industry's colonization of the sphere of potential avant-garde resistance, labor organizations were recognized in collective bargaining agreements, removing the possibility of the sit down strike from workers on the line. But there were workers on the line, and, their power in the system of production recognized, they were given better wages and benefits and a more secure social safety net, funded by extremely progressive taxation. [14] In 1944, the top marginal tax rate in the US was 94%. This wasn't reduced until 1964, when it became 77%. Our current (2011) top rate is less than half that: 35%. Unemployment insurance, Social Security and financial arrangements that made it possible (and even patriotic) to fund the suburban, car-driving, air-conditioned lifestyle with a reasonable dose of government-backed consumer debt.

Most striking for people at the time was not the increased possibility of middle-class prosperity, but the sudden reduction of working class misery. In a contemporary account (1960), Dorothy Thompson frames her critique of welfare capitalism with the following admission:

There is no doubt that—throughout Western Europe at any rate—the combined forces of economic stability, the high level of employment, the consolidation in certain important sectors of working-class power and influence, have, in the last fifteen years, raised the overall living standards of all sections of the people. Fifteen years is a short time, and it is hardly surprising that many people have been overwhelmed by the speed of the change. The most striking thing, for the older generations, has been the apparent abolition of poverty. They can still remember times when a skilled man in full employment could barely manage to raise a family decently, when no job was secure, when working-class children had to turn down grammar school scholarships because their parents could not afford the clothes to send them to school. These things were the rule, not the exception, and the comparison with the position of the skilled worker and his family today needs no labouring. [15]

Surely countless mainstream commentators made similar, likely more effusive observations, but in the pages of *New Left Review* the radical economist Joan Robinson corroborates Thompson's account, saying,

Since the war, statistical unemployment has barely touched 2 per cent. Whatever our present discontents, this is by no means to be despised. The worst part of heavy unemployment was not the waste of potential wealth (and, as we shall argue in a moment, its removal has not been achieved mainly by avoiding waste) but the rotting of individual lives, the damaged self-respect, the desperate egoism and cringing fear on one side and the smug self-deception on the other. Certainly we live now in a cleaner, more human country. But however thankful we should be for these blessings, it is too soon to claim that full employment vindicates latter-day capitalism. [16]

Aside from the foreboding sense of what awaits western society as this Fordist exception expires ("the rotting of individual lives"), these accounts seem to demonstrate a ground truth of that era: no matter how many episodes of Ozzie and Harriet one watched, it was the way these cultural objects reinforced what appeared to be the dominant - or emergent - material possibilities that made them so powerful. [17]

This gives a new meaning to Daniel Mato's declaration that "all industries are cultural." [18] Miller's nuanced critique aside, Mato's realization that that "all industries and forms of consumption are cultural," is empirically substantiated by both the spatio-temporal limits of

the postwar regime and the depths to which it transformed consciousness even before the specifically cultural components of the legitimating apparatus itself was specifically industrialized. Still, the practice of purchasing recorded trinkets of culture from media corporations became dominant, altering our basic relation with culture and leading Denning to claim:

The postmodern concept of culture was the result of the generalization of the commodity form throughout the realm the moderns had called culture. [. . .] Far from marking the places outside capital's empire, culture was itself an economic realm, encompassing the mass media, advertising, and the production and distribution of knowledge. Moreover, it came to signify not only the cultural industries and state cultural apparatuses, but the forms of working-class subsistence and consumption, both the goods and services supplied by the welfare state or purchased in the market, and the time of leisure and social reproduction outside the working day. [19]

It was in this second, more reified stage of the culture industry that Cultural Studies emerged in the UK. On the one side, the capitalist bargain struck with labor and the welfare state muffled the energy of class struggle; on the other, the dizzying flood of newly industrialized popular culture lacked a coherent critical complement.

By Stuart Hall's own admission, from within this affluent society the puzzle the New Left set out to solve was how, in the words of T. S. Eliot, "to bring the moment to a crisis." The British variant was less assured of the welfare state's destruction of what C. W. Mills later called the "labor metaphysic;" [20] still the goals and process Hall, Thompson, Williams and others in the British Cultural Studies lineage relied upon demonstrate at best an ambivalence about the role of structural economic forces and relations of production in producing an opening for further political development. In a pointed reminiscence of this period, reprinted in *New Left Review's* 50th anniversary issue, Hall splits hairs on the role of the current economic changes to class and consciousness. He says the editorial position of *NLR* was neither the assertion that nothing had changed (it was still capitalism, after all) characteristic of the Old Left, nor the mainstream sense that the "post-war consensus [...] had led to an erosion of traditional class cultures and the 'embourgeoisement' of the working class." [21]

We also challenged the prevailing view that the so-called affluent society would of itself erode the appeal of socialist propaganda—that socialism could arise only out of immiseration and degradation. Our emphasis on people taking action for themselves, 'building socialism from below' and 'in the here and now', not waiting for some abstract Revolution to transform everything in the twinkling of an eye, proved, in the light of the re-emergence of these themes after 1968, strikingly prefigurative.

As he says elsewhere in the article, "socialism was a conscious democratic movement and socialists were made, not born or given by the inevitable laws of history or the objective processes of the mode of production alone." In effect it wasn't really a denial of either of the above propositions: the question was more of how to convince an "embourgeoisied" working class that nothing significant had changed, even as contemporary "postmodern" cultural circumstances necessitated alternative and innovative forms of analysis. Within cultural studies, we are vastly more familiar with the latter innovations in analysis than the political processes meant to enable the former.

Hall's use of the term "prefigurative" points to the organizational similarity between the political strategy of the early *New Left Review* and present day, anarchist-inspired Occupy Wall Street movement: [22] namely, the creation of *New Left Review* reading clubs across the UK. In the article above, outlining his recollection of the New Left, Hall writes of the project of creating *NLR* clubs around Britain in order to engage people "where they were" and get conversations going about socialism. They weren't alone, of course, in doing this and it's not

entirely contextualized, but there is a real attention to politically engaging "the people" and getting them interested in these ideas and their importance for social change. As with the General Assembly of the various iterations of #Occupy, in practice, this meant opening the conversations broadly, in local communities, and getting people engaged in the discussion rather than giving a top-down proscription of what the discussion should look like - or such was Hall's ideal. In the absence, in other words, of a R/W realm of culture in the culture industry, the New Left would try to supplement the popular dearth of social democracy by bringing its practice to the people.

While he draws a distinction between himself and Thompson earlier in the essay, by the end it is clear that, in terms of how he understood socialist activism at the time, he remained deeply inspired by Thompson's work on William Morris (presaging his arguments in *Making of the Working Class*). To demonstrate this, Hall quotes from his editorial in the first issue of NLR:

We have to go into towns and cities, universities and technical colleges, youth clubs and Trade Union branches and—as Morris said—make socialists there. We have come through 200 years of capitalism and 100 years of imperialism. Why should people—naturally—turn to socialism? There is no law which says that the Labour Movement, like a great inhuman engine, is going to throb its way into socialism or that we can, any longer . . . rely upon poverty and exploitation to drive people, like blind animals, towards socialism. Socialism is, and will remain, an active faith in a new society, to which we turn as conscious, thinking human beings. People have to be confronted with experience, called to the 'society of equals', not because they have never had it so bad, but because the 'society of equals' is better than the best soft-selling consumer capitalist society, and life is something lived, not something one passes through like tea through a strainer.

Two things are evident in this - as in the rest of the essay - which gives what I think is great insight into what the Thompson and Hall agreed on in this movement. One is that they are connecting their struggle to a much longer one (interpreted through the lens of Thompson's historical account of Morris). And in so doing they prized the democratic process of "populist" discussion above having a clear set of political and theoretical principles that they would address to the people. According to Hall, it was actually the inability to operate a journal in this context - "the editorial board the fear that a journal of ideas could not be effectively run by committees" - which ultimately led him to resign as editor. I will return to this process oriented politics below.

This is a telling foible of Hall's - though perhaps one of the more forgivable ones: namely that he prized (or, more importantly, wanted to appear to prize) process over the content of the ideas. At the time, this was a very sensible principle (as he demonstrates by contextualizing it in relation to the left factions vying for control over the dominant narrative.) However, as time went on, it seems to have become a serious liability. His discussion of the CND campaign and the way it became an articulated struggle spanning lines of class and social status is obviously included as a nod to - if not refracted as a memory through - the more prominent understanding of socialist politics adopted at the time he was writing (in 1988) Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. [23]

But equally visible is the reason behind two dominant paradigms that emerge from this moment. [24] On the one hand, the socialist humanism of Thompson; on the other, the theoretical anti-humanism of Althusser. They are rightly seen as being opposed in discussions of the New Left and nascent Cultural Studies, but they are clearly of a piece with their historical moment. Both take the economic consensus and the political domination of the welfare state for granted in their framing of the role culture - dominated as it was by the "read only" cultural industries - played in cementing (or potentially overturning) that consensus. [25]

In Hall's description of the need for a new approach at the time, he notes the importance of socialist humanism and the need to examine the role that culture was playing in keeping people from thinking about the problems of capitalism. [26]

The purpose of discussing the cinema or teen-age culture in NLR is not to show that, in some modish way, we are keeping up with the times. These are directly relevant to the imaginative resistances of people who have to live within capitalism—the growing points of social discontent, the projections of deeply-felt needs. Our experience of life today is so extraordinarily fragmented. The task of socialism is to meet people where they are, where they are touched, bitten, moved, frustrated, nauseated—to develop discontent and, at the same time, to give the socialist movement some direct sense of the times and ways in which we live.

Alienation - the quintessential Marxist humanist concept of the *Manuscripts* - became a good way of framing this; the emphasis on "directly living" one's conditions and being active in their creation is the strategy that Thompson recommended for getting people active again. The importance of alienation as a political concept therefore becomes paramount as a political strategy in a time when the working class had won a significant share of the economic pie, but had stopped far short of worker control.

The key appeal of the socialist front had to be the resurrection of some primal sense of anomie at how, despite material comfort, there was less control over the realm representations and less creativity possible both there and in the workplace (hence the importance of *Braverman's Labor and Monopoly Capital* to the early Birmingham School. [27]) Alienation, in this regard, was a strategically chosen line of critique, admittedly elaborated most fully in the line of the Post-Frankfurt School critic Herbert Marcuse. [28] And, to be sure, much of this was already prefigured (though in much more dour German tones) in the interwar Frankfurt School critique of the culture industry and state capitalism - if not in Lukacs even earlier descriptions in *History and Class Consciousness*. [29] Looking back on this from a post-2008 perspective, it is hard to see alienation looming as large as the "rotting of individual lives" in our future theory; yet it is easy to see why it held prime space in the plumbing socialism of the time.

Though a full accounting of Althusser is beyond my purview here, on the basics he agreed. True, he was focused less on the stimulation of agency and more on the rigorous elaboration of a theoretical paradigm fit for this new age. The malleability of his system is demonstrated by its elaboration by Hall and others in the 1970s Birmingham School, his near contemporary Poulantzas and later by those Alain Lipietz termed the "Rebel Sons of Althusser" in the Regulationist School of economic theory. [30] While proving it would require a much longer demonstration, I would assert that he was not all that inspired by the possibility that the security of economic realm would ever be undermined again - that class consciousness per se would not become prominent because of a direct material change in circumstances. Unlike the Regulationists, whose model relies upon the ideological power of the economic system itself, there is a remoteness of the economy's power (only in the last instance) within Althusser's descriptions - though it was still too close for the critics of economism - shifted the focus to the way the political and cultural realms were able to secure and reproduce the system despite the remaining inequality and oppression at its heart. The dominant iteration of his abstract model, so to speak, was caste with a certain concrete social formation in mind.

Each of these paradigms is founded on the presumption that the political economic system will remain as it was. The state would remain as an organ of control over the economy, making the Gramscian concept of hegemony essential to the overall strategy - and the cultural realm a key target for undermining the current reproduction. As I said above, this produces a variety of distinctions around their impressions of the culture industry, political and theoretical strategies. But they both fundamentally agree that class as a directly experienced difference in

relation to either the mode of production or the realities of distribution and opportunity would, for the foreseeable future, be increasingly less salient than people's feeling of alienation in relation to "the spectacle."

Thus it is clearer why the Birmingham School took their particular tack to the culture industry at the time. Harney, in his summary of their approach, notes that they were focused largely on three elements. First, the ground level, almost ethnographic focus on everyday life, or what he calls "the massive daily activity in populations." While Harney sees in this a nascent economic realization ("Cultural studies gave us a sense of the vast wealth at stake, of the value latent in popular culture, a value that would soon be realized in the creative industries") Hall and others at the time were interested in this as a political concern: seeing this massive daily activity, making it visible and notable, was a way of publicizing the continued vitality of the popular mind beneath what scholars saw as the stifling alienation of industrial (and industrialized) culture.

The same concern animated the other components identified by Harney. He points to their "politics of consumption" and "politics of distribution" as indicative of their prescient ability to "grasp [that] the expansion in circulation of cultural forms appeared to create new value everywhere." Retrospectively, Harney is clearly correct in this assessment, but it is important, again, to note why these intellectual tacks were taken. On the one hand, it is a direct result of the assumption - and largely the material reality - that people could not participate in the culture industries themselves. The uniquely dominant "read only" culture industry of the time prevented them from creating broadly distributed alternative or oppositional forms of culture. This left them to consider the continuing vitality of politics at the point of consumption and the subcultural spaces that made this possible. In other words, while the current mode of production makes these spaces obvious sources of cognitive, immaterial economic value, for Birmingham they were potential sources of political power. [31]

Harney signals this when he mentions cultural studies has been lately caricatured for looking to these areas and practices as zones of potential resistance. But it is more important to remind ourselves of why they were looking there instead of elsewhere. Again, Harney hints at this when he says, "Some of this emphasis on circulation and consumption was intended to blunt the productivist tendencies cultural studies encountered on the Left." [32] While I can't give a complete philology of the term, productivist, the key lineage Harney draws upon here is that, again, of the autonomist Marxists. As Gill and Pratt describe it,

Autonomist writers are critical of some Marxists for their failure to appreciate the significance of work as constitutive of social life, and for their tendency to romanticize labour. Negri notes that it is sometimes treated as if it were 'a title of nobility' rather than the central mechanism of capitalist domination. He indicts other socialists for their commitment to 'productivism', seeing it both as a retreat from critical analysis and from utopian imagination. [33]

Harney walks a tight line here between the ideas of Birmingham and those of Turin, but the distinctions between the two are revelatory. For our purposes here, it is important to specify that Hall was likely less taken with the more utopian, Spinozan line of the Autonomists, particularly those refracted through the Foucauldian lens of Hardt and Negri. Clearly people like Thompson were interested in something like the production of subjectivities through the labor process - and his later work likely inspired Hall in some way. [34] But the Spinozan form of class struggle was barely nascent at the time. We can say that Hall and Birmingham were responding to productivist pressure from the left for our purposes, if we mean that, unlike orthodox Marxists, they saw the labor process as being an unlikely source for resistance in their contemporary era.



As Chris Maisano has recently pointed out in relation to Mills own ambivalence on working class activism, the dominant New Left focus on cultural and intellectual proxies was not just a theoretical error: it seemed completely disconnected from the actual events going on at the time:

Most importantly, the theoretical premise that underpins Mills' rejection of the working class is deeply flawed. As noted above, he argued that organized workers could be a decisive force only during the beginning stages of industrialization or under conditions of political autocracy and repression. The historical record does not bear this argument out. It does not hold when considering workers' movements around the turn of the 20th century, and it has even less explanatory power when we look at the 1960s and 1970s. An unprecedented strike wave hit the U.S. and Western Europe in this period. In 1970, there were over 5,700 strikes in the U.S. involving over 3 million workers, and radical rank-and-file caucuses challenging conservative union bureaucracies in addition to the bosses sprung up in a number of major unions. In Italy, the 1969-1970 "Hot Autumn" strike wave was the biggest and longest in history. These events undermined the New Left thesis that the welfare state bought off the working class and undermined its traditional role as the leading force for radical social change. Indeed, through full or near-full employment and social policies that provided a measure of income support and social security for working people, it helped to encourage such action. [35]

On the other hand, it is worth noting that some of the first studies of the Culture Industry in the Cultural Studies orbit were focused on the way these and other labor disputes were being portrayed in the press. The main topic of the Glasgow Media Group's *Bad News* was the way the televisual medium managed to distort labor issues in the interest of the dominant hegemonic order - a topic that Hartley returns to throughout his work and even figures in Fiske's *Television Culture*. [36] The issue for these studies was less an early iteration of Thomas Frank's reductive thesis in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and more a question of why labor issues, which were of potentially wide interest, were not gaining traction in the national conversation. [37]

And, for another turn of the screw, despite the relative silence by Birmingham School scholars of these events, they figure centrally into those theories of labor Harney sees as parallel. Not only were the events of the "Hot Autumn" constitutive of the autonomist legacy, but both they and the strike waves in the US were founded on a somewhat common philosophy. As May paraphrases Tronti,

The point to emphasize is that for the working class to confront its own labor as capital it must reject those institutions which valorize labor inasmuch as that labor is capital, namely, the institutional labor movement - for the institutions and norms of business unionism are designed precisely to manage industrial conflict and discipline the materializations of working bodies. A contract, to provide only one example, usually concedes management decisions to the boss and legally binds workers to no-strike agreements. [38]

The strikes of Turin and throughout the US were unique in being wildcat strikes, "Often," in the words of Cal Winslow, "repudiations of the union leadership and, implicitly, of the entire postwar system of industrial relations." [39] While this doesn't vindicate the Birmingham assumptions (anymore than it makes them identical to those of the Autonomists) it does validate their belief that change would be unlikely from within the institutions of that system of industrial relations. And this, to return to the overarching theme, explains the particular emphasis they placed on the culture industry and the remaining potential for resistance in relation to the products it distributed.

Now we exist in some Frankenstein of a third stage. Periodization is perilous work. Analytical distinctions are always messy and subject to contention. More importantly for these purposes, I shudder to think of how readers will react if I subject them to another account of the origins and spread of neoliberalism as an economic utopia of upper class reactionaries. It is clear from the economic data, that neoliberalism is not all that dynamic as an economic model per se, nor is its rhetorical shift of emphasis away from the state and towards markets an accurate representation of reality. Markets have become more powerful, but only through the now ex-nominated force of the neoliberal state. [40] This creates an amazing channel for redistributing income upward and allows the movement of capital to take place on a global scale. [41] Boosters of this transformation - as far back as Daniel Bell and the Tofflers - have long assumed (though without saying it) that the imperial dominance of the US will secure a healthy future for those who buy into the promises of the New Economy. It is amazing that though this myth has become as an organizing principle of our political, cultural and social life, the latest permutations of its promises still enchant and entice us: their novelty, it appears, never wears off, no matter how much tarnish it accumulates. Though most of us lost out on the last round of deindustrialization and financialization, with the right education and well-oiled bootstraps, this next turn will be different. [42]

Hall and company presided over the initial elements of the ideological parry legitimating this transition. [43] But clearly there was a broad set of conjectural forces that led to its dominance and spread. Disempowering labor and disciplining the poor seems, in retrospect, to have been a clear goal of this transition. The rearguard reaction of austerity after 2008 demonstrates this without a shadow of a doubt. Yet the fantasy of a post-industrial society was inspiring. As Andrew Ross has recently pointed out, the demand for more intellectually stimulating, individually empowering work such as that of creative labor was central to the workers movements of the 1970s. [44] Were it not for the accompanying precarity, it might be bearable. [45]

This was supposed to turn out differently for us. In the 1990s, speculating on strategies for urban development in the postindustrial economy, Richard Florida proposed the concept of the creative class. This nascent population was attracted like moths to city lights and urban appurtenances like deindustrialized loft space, sports stadiums, and LGBTQ enclaves. For city planners this was wonderful news since it meant they no longer had to undertake politically difficult tasks like economic planning: just throw out the cheap and easy catnip - which basically meant leaving the pre-gentrified, deindustrialized spaces of racially-segregated "urban blight" alone until "creatives" could displace the remaining poor minorities, revive it, and entice yuppies with actual money and jobs to move in and install the granite countertops and stainless steel appliances that would ultimately increase property values (and the tax base). Along the way, if tech start-ups or marketing firms wanted pools of cheap, precarious labor to exploit, they would find them readily available.

This is what Richard Lloyd, in his investigation of the Wicker Park area of Chicago, discovers is the primary result of the culture-industry geared development of that era: a lopsided arrangement where the bohemian underclass persists contract to contract at the will of fly-by-night startups gunning to make a killing on an IPO and then move on. The few sustained businesses resembling "creative industry" mainstays were only sustained by their ability to rely on this flexible pool of talented labor. [46] In the words of Andrew Ross, it was nice work if you could get it. David Harvey concurs, saying that most of the benefits of this economic development plan were sopped up in rising property values, most of which did little except fuel a housing bubble, the results of which the world knows all too well. [47]

At the same time, our economic and social disempowerment is mirrored by an incredible proliferation of possibilities for creating culture. Though the main organs of the Culture Industry remain in the hands of a few multinational corporations - and though our creative labor largely serves their bottom lines rather than our own - the expansion of spaces for conversation

and constructive intellectual endeavors is seemingly unprecedented. Cultural Studies scholars are fully aware of - and rightly enthusiastic about - these new forms of cultural production and reception. In many ways, this breakdown of the circuit of culture was foretold many years ago, when the newly translated introduction to the *Grundrisse* led Hall, Johnson and others to speculate on the true nature of culture, which lay submerged beneath the institutional weight of the culture industries. [48] People, the story went, were not dupes: they just had no way to register their necessarily alternative readings except through subcultural appropriations that were, by definition, invisible to the dominant culture. As Lawrence Lessig says in his *Remix* this "read only" culture has now been remade by a transformation in the productive and distributional technologies and the social software by which we utilize it. [49] It is now, at least potentially, a "Read/Write" or, in Jenkins words, convergence culture. [50]

Again, like the account of neoliberalism, this transformation is tiresome to replay, if only because it hides a great deal of residual corporate control. Likewise, it is hard to say whether the new networked infrastructure actually creates more democratic control over culture, or just makes the always already complex "everyday life" of culture visible on a grander scale.

On the other hand, there is little doubt that, while face-to-face planning meetings were essential, Western anticapitalist movements like those that converged in Seattle in 1999 and throughout the early 2000s at trade and economic meetings around the world were greatly facilitated by the new means of communication, via organs like Indymedia. The present Occupy movements seem to have spread via a similar alternative communication network, though their bread and butter seem to be the unusual "prefigurative" experience of actually communing with fellow flesh and blood humans. Whatever the long term effects of this movement, it has achieved something unprecedented in recent memory: it helped shift the conversation from the hegemonic hair-splitting of punishing austerity to, in the words of Joshua Holland, "a discussion of the real issues facing Main Street: the lack of jobs - and especially jobs with decent benefits - spiraling inequality, cash-strapped American families' debt-loads, and the pernicious influence of money in politics that led us to this point." [51]

This is a belated realization that the apparent decline of our alienation in relation to the spectacle corresponds to the moment when class power is more pronounced than at any time in the 20th century - or at least its second half. In this, Cultural Studies questions are all the more urgent even as they realize that some of its basic premises was fundamentally incorrect - or at least highly conjunctural. Namely, that the economy disembedded from society remains a key form of coercive power and a crucial lever of political and cultural change. Therefore organizing politics around material as well as cultural issues remains - or is once again - essential. Nowhere is this clearer than in the current permutation of the culture industry - or just the tech-facilitated demotic eruption of the mercurial process of culture in general - and the dominant narrative about our collective future as workers in the creative industries.

To be blunt, the most important issue facing us is not how to produce more creative, inspirational, progressive, or transformational culture. Though the incumbent industries continue to fight their own rearguard action with bills like SOPA and treaties like ACTA, it is clear that people will make stuff - all kinds of stuff - if they are given time and materials. Even the alienation of work is hardly a pressing problem when so much work is now precarious. In other words, the basic issues of redistribution come once again to the fore. The enormous redistribution upwards must be reversed, by force if necessary: to cite a prescient fellow on this, "the expropriators must be expropriated." In a sense, the upset of the culture industry alongside the tremendous economic collapse brought on by irrational finance has been a laboratory demonstration of how little of cultural and social value is actually rewarded economically by our current system.

As a society, we have plenty of resources - probably too much, if the climate had any say about it. Houses now sit empty across the globe - from foreclosed properties in the US to enormous

ghost cities of overpriced housing in China - while slums are expanding. In the US, a national charity - called Feeding America - features centrally in the narrative of NBC's product placement juggernaut *The Biggest Loser*. The goal of this charity is patently absurd by any reasonable standard. Everyday, grocery stores, farmers, and food manufacturers throw away perfectly good food simply because hungry, jobless people lack the tiny certificates to trade for it. The charity asks people to donate money so that they can buy this food from the retailers and make it available to needy people, obviating the possibility that the precious M-C-M' cycle might be undermined by pressure of human need. [52] Clothing retailers, likewise, often shred unbought clothing to prevent homeless or otherwise needy people from using it. [53] In his recent book on the economic crisis, Zizek speaks of the economic system that creates this insanity in terms of Pareto Optimality:

A century ago, Vilfredo Pareto was the first to describe the so-called 80/20 rule of social (and not only social) life: 80 percent of the land is owned by 20 percent of the people, 80 percent of the profits are produced by 20 percent of the employees, 80 percent of decisions are made in 20 percent of the meeting time, 80 percent of the links to the Web point to less than 20 percent of the Webpages, 80 percent of the peas come from 20 percent of the peapods. As some social analysts and economists have suggested, the contemporary explosion of productivity confronts us with the ultimate case of this rule: the coming global economy will tend towards a state in which only 20 percent of the labor force are able to do all the necessary work, so that 80 percent of people will be basically irrelevant and of no use, thus potentially unemployed. As this logic reaches its extreme, would it not be reasonable to bring it to its self-negation: is not a system which renders 80 percent of people irrelevant and useless *itself irrelevant and of no use*. [54]

Globally, if not nationally, we likely have the largest proportion of citizens trained to do creative, critical work AND able to use most affordable consumer grade tools in its production, distribution, and consumption in the history of human culture. Were the food, health, transportation, housing, and education infrastructure distributed and supported in relatively proportional levels, these citizens could likely live and produce in relative comfort, possibly even to the point of letting the third world subjects who produce many of their life necessities to share their leisurely lifestyle. After all, isn't this basically what the promise of modernization is supposed to bring? More leisure, now instead of when we imagine ourselves retiring? If technology is making it necessary for fewer people to work (or for all people to work less), that seems like a good thing: it just needs to be dealt with in a fair and proportional manner. Instead, what we find is the absurdity Andre Gorz describes in his *Critique of Economic Reason*:

The continued division of society [as dominant economic theorists now conceive it] is inevitable. The reason for this division will be (as it is already) the unequal distribution of the savings made in working hours: an increasingly large proportion of the population will continue to be expelled, or else marginalized, from the sphere of economic activities, whilst another section will continue to work as much as, or even more than, it does at present, commanding, as a result of its [perceived] performances or aptitudes ever-increasing incomes and economic powers. Unwilling to give up part of their work and the prerogatives and powers that go with their jobs, the members of this professional elite will only be able to increase their leisure time by getting third parties to procure their free time for them. Therefore they will ask these third parties to do in their place things everyone is capable of doing, particularly all labour referred to as 'reproduction.' And they will purchase services and appliances which will allow them to save time even when producing these services and appliances takes more time than the average person will save by using them. They will thus foster the development, across the whole of society, of activities which have no economic rationality - since the people performing them have to spend more time doing them than

the people benefiting from them actually save - and which only serve the private interests of this professional elite, who are able to purchase time more cheaply than they can sell it personally. These are activities performed by servants, whatever the status of the people who do them or method of payment used. [55]

Thus we return to what Robinson described above as the interwar condition where, "the damaged self-respect, the desperate egoism and cringing fear on one side [meets] the smug self-deception on the other." This time, however, it is sold as a glorious future of precarious cultural production as servants to the rich. While we live in a world of plenty, our potentates are running around like the folks at Feeding America, trying to figure out how they can distribute pointless jobs to people so they can afford to buy stuff that would otherwise go to waste. At both ends of the equation are the wealthy 1%: we must figure out how to produce value for them through some direct, servile activity so that we can earn a wage to purchase the commodities that will provide them with their necessary profits. If our life and death weren't so utterly dependent on it, this charade would indeed be a farce. As it stands, it is merely a tragedy.

In discussing the consequences of this potential impending reality, Zizek turns to one of the fonts of leftish wisdom for commentary. Antonio Negri, in an interview with *Le Monde* chides textile workers picketing for their rights. Zizek paraphrases his well-known position thusly:

For Negri, the workers stood for all that is wrong with traditional trade-unionist socialism focused on job security, a socialism hopelessly rendered obsolete by the dynamics of 'post-modern' capitalism and the hegemonic position of cognitive labor. According to Negri, instead of reacting to this 'new spirit of capitalism' in the traditional social democratic fashion, seeing it as a threat, one should fully embrace it, in order to discern within it - in the dynamics of cognitive labor with its non-hierarchical and non-centralized forms of social interaction - the seeds of communism. [56]

In this third phase of the culture industry - and studies of it - we have feasted on a steady diet of this political economic vision. Surely it has caused a great deal of indigestion, but the overall shift to thinking about culture in these terms is undeniable. As Harney argues, the overlap here makes a great deal of sense given their conjunctural intellectual affinities. However, immaterial labor, the Multitude and the prefigurative politics of the common have become the dominant threshold of permissible thinking and strategy. Instead of working towards redistribution or organizing labor or social movements with specific political economic demands, the Italianate oracles of the Common recommend a hands off approach which is guaranteed to do nothing to offend or oppress anyone because it is guaranteed to have almost no direct effect at all.

In the supposedly biopolitical forms of production that dominate today, it is less clear that the process of primitive accumulation prevents us from sustaining ourselves physically except in so far as the appropriated value, had it been remunerated, could have been used to support our purchase of the commodities necessary for life. In this sense, the new forms of precarious labor are certainly instructive in helping us to understand just how exceptional the Fordist economy was. But this doesn't mean, as Hardt and Negri claim, that "biopolitical production is not constrained by the logic of scarcity." [57] The multitude may be an excellent example of Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs," but its constituent components are still constrained by the need to sustain themselves physically. In a sense, this exuberance over the third stage of the culture industry has blinkered us to the material realities that were perfectly obvious at each of the previous stages.

Hardt and Negri are generally, frustratingly vague about how the biopolitical common will also support its biological entities - and therefore how their exit from this arbitrary servitude to capital will be possible. This is true across the three volumes of their opus. In most cases,

their work operates, as Timothy Brennon describes *Empire*, "in terms of an *interstitial logic*. It plays in the theoretical registers of plausible deniability;" its baroque "fresco of the political constitution of the present renders ambiguity the virtue of being 'theoretical.'" Therefore their apparent lack of any concern for the material reality of people's everyday lives or the possible efficacy of other forms of conventional political struggle can always be answered with "the ready riposte [that] the reader merely misunderstood." [58]

They only briefly address this in their most recent book, *Commonwealth*, wherein they descend, for six pages out of 400, to elaborate on a set of Keynesian inspired reforms "aimed at providing the infrastructure necessary for biopolitical production." [59] These include adequate food, drinking water, sanitary conditions, electricity, "and other physical necessities to support life," as well as a compendium of further necessities: education, access to an internet that is open at all levels, money for research, freedom of movement, freedom of time (i.e. a guaranteed minimum income, which is ultimately what Gorz recommends to end the absurdity he describes), and a completely participatory form of democracy. Like Keynes, they insist that these should be instituted by capital in order to save itself, but that they will still only be done "when capital is forced to accept them." By what means and with what leverage we are supposed to force its hand, they don't say.

Yet, even if it does so - whether because it is forced by struggles or "pursuing its own interests and trying preserve its own survival" - it will ultimately create "its own gravediggers." Here we discover that, once these things are provided, "the multitude will emerge with the ability autonomously to rule common wealth." [60] The precondition of their entire oeuvre, in other words, is a society with all the benefits of socialism and social democracy, but none of the messy politics of organization. On how to achieve this precondition, they also remain silent.

Current economic and political realities demand that Cultural Studies and studies of the cultural industries fill in this gap. The struggle we face is much older than our discipline and in some ways it requires our building once again the material preconditions of post-war critical theory. Better yet, we should demand what the post-war consensus never imagined: the list supplied by Hardt and Negri is a good start, but as any activist on those issues will tell you, it is a long, divisive slog. Serendipitously, the current social movement is perfectly positioned to begin articulating these demands, and, as mentioned above, Cultural Studies has a legacy of working with reflexivity and openness.

However, it should be said that, as a movement, the emergent demands of Occupy Wall Street are far less radical: for the most part, it seems the mainstream participants find the most troubling aspect of contemporary US society that it fails to live up to the narrative drafted in that post war era. Taking on debt to get a college education was supposed to guarantee a comfortable bourgeois livelihood. The stifling alienation of the welfare state and the stable job appear as far off fantasies to the current generation of well-educated debt peons.

Here the path of Cultural Studies and the Occupy movement come into direct material contact, if not conflict. Along with the mutual concern for a more democratic and just society, they also sit in concrete material relation. On the one side are the protesters above who find themselves saddled with unprecedented financial liabilities and no foreseeable way to discharge them. Andrew Ross and others have been quick to notice this and have begun one of the few concrete efforts at making demands through the Occupy Student Debt movement: namely, creating a debt strike. On the other side, Cultural Studies as an academic and intellectual endeavor, finds itself in one of the last bastions of the publically funded culture industry: in a swirling era of postmodern culture, where all the remaining non-capitalist arenas have been commodified, the commodification of education has been slow (though hardly immune from this trend). Yet it is ultimately the students above who have made this shelter possible. Their relentless and diligent self-exploitation has helped to pay the tuition, which pays an increasingly large proportion of

the salaries and operational funds of academic departments housing all forms of critical inquiry. This says nothing, of course, about the similarly diligent self-exploitation of the casualized academic labor force that shores up budgets on the other end.

A reckoning is coming however. The occupy movement will either transform this element of the culture industry for the better, or it will help venture capitalists drive it into complete obsolescence. Lining up on one side are those who will begin to question the value of this institution at all. For young people watching this unfold, the question of the value of a college degree is clearly ambiguous. If taking on debt and undertaking a long process of learning will place them in no less precarious position, why bother. Better yet, if learning can be accomplished through open access MOOCs or General Assembly type working groups, is it really necessary to pony up the cash?

On the other side, however, higher education (and education more generally) is poised to become the next financial bubble. While students may become skeptical of the value of the degree, the current administration believes it is innately valuable -regardless of the learning it represents. The vast federal funds available for underprivileged students have drawn the vultures of venture capital in thick flocks. Promising increased efficiency through online platforms and the final elimination of tenure, they hope to drain the last remaining public funds for education and, in the case of K-12, effectively destroy the public system. This will not last long as it will likely be completely ineffective pedagogically, implemented as it will be with little input from people with an interest in teaching or learning. After the damage is done, the winners will take their spoils and move on.

This needn't be the future of the academy or the future of cultural studies, much less the future of the current generation. But in many ways, the problem at hand is the problem of all culture industries: there are likely more than enough people to educate the coming generation. Paying for these teachers (i.e. us) shouldn't be left to the students or their families. And the money available to do this shouldn't be siphoned off by representatives of the very financial class that caused this situation to begin with. Occupy Student Debt helps to target the first element, with Ross saying, "We think education is a right and a public good, and we think federal funding is the only way the United States can join the list of other countries that offer free public education." [61] And, though this movement has struck the ire of the for-profit sector (at least via the pages of *Inside Higher Ed*), [62] it will take even more specific demands to limit the possibility that august institutions like Kaplan or The University of Phoenix will be the ones happily administering this free public education.

Scholars of Cultural Studies and the culture industry have a rare opportunity to intervene in this struggle. They must begin with an understanding of the relationship between their theory and the dominant political economy as well as the legacy of its permutations over the past half-century. More importantly, they must strike a delicate balance between the process-oriented, prefigurative politics of the democratic socialist tradition they wish to encourage and the clearly articulated demand for what Ross calls "the making of sustainable livelihoods." [63] This means taking the best from each of the eras we've just gone through such that, in his words, "Everyone should have a right to choose their own balance of freedom and security in employment, and we should craft policies to ensure that making the wrong choices does not prove catastrophic to people." Creating a culture with these values is essential to our common future - and it is possible we are closer than we have been in a generation to bringing it about.

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